

IS SECULARISM SO GOOD FOR WOMEN?

Marc Jacquemain – University of Liege

In a very well-known essay, Susan Möller Okin (1999) asks: « *Is multiculturalism bad for women* ». The argument is straightforward: protecting minority culture is a valuable normative ideal, but it may enter in contradiction with an overarching ideal for democrats: equal treatment and respect for all *individuals*, and in particular equal respect and treatment for men and women. For many cultures do not treat men and women equally, and, on the whole, (at least according to Okin), western cultures are at the moment the less patriarchal ones. So, granting special protection to minority cultures within western countries could easily amount to worsen the situation of women inside the minority groups by reinforcing the grip of more patriarchal social norms. Examples are also well-known, the most often quoted being the practice of genital mutilations on little girls in some African countries.

This is a troubling question, because it reminds us that two values which most of us consider as extremely important, respect for cultures and respect for individuals, may often clash. At least, they may clash if we consider not only individual cultural rights (the right for individuals to follow their cultural practices as long as they do not harm any other individuals), but also *group rights*, i.e. the rights for communities to organize their lives along their own group rules, which means the possibility to impose some burdens on the individuals (especially the women) who are part of the group.

The argument of Okin is fundamental (we cannot just discard it), and at the same time disputable (the notion of what a *burden* is cannot altogether be considered as completely independent from culture). There have been many rejoinders and many responses and this is not the subject matter of this paper.

But in the context of rising xenophobia in Europe, this argument has been used as a powerful weapon to dismiss and attack Islam as an « unacceptable » religion, contrary to any reasonable conception of equality between men and women. This attack has taken various forms, according to the « national ethos » of different countries: Christian Joppke (2009) compares the way the « veil controversy » developed in France, Britain and Germany, and he shows that the claim of « Christian Identity » in Germany displays more or less the same functional role as « *laïcité* » in France¹. So, in the case of France, and to some extent in Belgium, *secularism*² is presented within the public debate as the shield that aims at protecting Muslim women against the heavy patriarchal stance of their own religious/cultural « community ». This « alliance » between secularism and feminism against Islam (and very secondarily, Catholicism) can be presented as the main ideological grid

¹ Assuming that while the « political treatment » of the veil for pupils in France can be accommodated within a liberal frame, the question of the veil for teachers in Germany is fundamentally illiberal.

² We will discuss below the semantic problems associated with the concept of « secularism ».

according to which relations between gender, secularism and democracy are framed³ within the French and Belgian public debates.

There is at least one circumstantial reason to be sceptical about this « storytelling »: it has become a central narrative within the propaganda of radical right populism. Especially in France, the leader of the *Front National*, Marine Le Pen seems to have accomplished a sudden conversion to both secularism and feminism. It may seem odd: the FN has since the beginning defended at the same time traditional roles for women and the most traditionalist catholicism. The figure the Front promotes as the symbolic representation of France in all its demonstrations is Joan of Arc, who displays the example of the heroic nationalist warrior inspired by God. It is difficult to imagine a narrative that would be more opposed to the « feminist/secularist » alliance. So, even if this ideological move is, most probably, partly strategic, it is a true « conversion » within the radical right and it leads to the marginalization of some important ideological options of the party⁴. This move has already had some effects within some fringes of the feminist movement. Somebody as important among feminists as Elisabeth Badinter declared as soon as September 2011 that: « *Unfortunately Marine Le Pen was the last politician in France to defend 'laïcité'* »⁵.

The aim of this paper is precisely to raise some questions about to which extent this « alliance » between feminism and secularism is a genuine one and to explore what the « function⁶ » of this « frame » could be within the ideological context of Europe. I will mainly stick to the context of French speaking Belgium, which I know best, but this will need some references to the situation in other European countries, mainly France.

1. The school wars: the first move toward a secular(ized) society (± 1850-1960)

What is a « secular society »? The first distinction that I would like to draw should be straightforward: « secularism » is not « secularization ». While the first concept refers to constitutional arrangements (separation between the State and religion), the second describes an empirical sociological process: the loss of salience and importance of religion within a society. A simple example can make the difference evident: until very recently Sweden was not a formally secular State, for it had Lutheranism as a State religion until 2000. But Sweden is, like all Lutheran societies, a very secularized society, in which religious practice asymptotically tends to zero and where religion very weakly influences collective beliefs or daily life. On the contrary, the United States is a strongly secular State, which forbids the presence of religion as such within the institutions, while it is anything but a

³ For the concept of « frame », see Rydgren (2003). See also Benford and Snow (2000).

⁴ For instance, Marine Le Pen has decided to support the right to abortion of the law Weil. It was one of the notable discordances with her unfortunate competitor at the presidency of the FN, Bruno Gollnisch, at the beginning of 2011

⁵ Journal Le Monde – to be completed.

⁶ I use here the term « function » in a weak sense, as a variable mix of intended and not intended consequences. I will also use the terms « frame » and « ideology » as exchangeable.

secularized society, given the importance people grant to God and religion in their everyday life⁷ (Norris and Inglehart, 2011).

But if this distinction is conceptually simple, it is historically more complicated. In Belgium and France, the move toward a secular State and the move toward a secularized society have been historically led by the same forces. In France, the « war between two Frances » dominated the last part of the 19th century and was put to an end by the famous law of separation of state and church in 1905. No same thing happened in Belgium. The Belgian revolution (1830) was led by a historical alliance inside the bourgeoisie between the liberal secularists (among which an active fraction of freemasons) and the (more or less) conservative catholics. This alliance was broken as soon as 1847 and for a great deal of the 19th century the political history of Belgium is a history of competition between both forces. In 1884, catholics take the lead until 1919 when universal suffrage is granted and the *Parti Ouvrier Belge* (Belgian Workers' Party) becomes the second force in parliament.

Was there in this period an « alliance » between secularism and feminism? It is, to say the least, very dubious. For the whole 19th century, in France as well as in Belgium, the secularists (Liberals in Belgium, Republicans in France) were for instance very reluctant to grant the suffrage to women. In fact, women were seen under the influence of catholic priests and there was a fear among secularists that the vote of women could reinforce the influence of catholic parties (Baubérot, 2005; 2011). Universal suffrage for women was accorded only after WWII in both countries (1946 in France, 1948 in Belgium). In Belgium, it represents a time lag of 30 years. In France, the time lag is one century, which is very long compared to most countries and leads Youssef Courbage and Emmanuel Todd (2007) to speak of a specific French (republican) anti-feminism.

During the whole period between 1850 and the end of the Second World War, it is thus difficult to speak of an « alliance » or even a « general convergence » between feminism and secularism. Women were seen rather as allied of clerics, and the convergence was effective only when supporting women's claims could lead to weaken the strength of the Catholic Church. For instance, in both countries, the social security system elaborated just after WWII with a strong support of the (secularist) socialist left was based on rather patriarchal principles: it was a rather « Bismarckian » system of rights based on a "male bread-winner model". In times of peace, the potential feminine labour force was rather encouraged to stay at home according to the model of traditional family and most social rights for women were « derived » rights, i.e. rights they received through the situation of the « head of household », the working man. This system was protective for the workers, but on the whole, it was not very in favour of women's autonomy.

⁷ At least, according to surveys. There could be a norm of social acceptability that would lead American respondents to overemphasize their religiosity, while an opposite social norm could lead respondents in some European countries to partly conceal their religious commitments.

This situation can be partly explained by the fact that in this whole period, the very preoccupation of secularism was not women's condition but compulsory education⁸. Who was to take the lead in that matter? This was the main battlefield between liberal (or republican) secularists and catholics for a whole century. But the solution was very different in both countries. While the state school became the (very) dominant model for compulsory education in France, it was not the case in Belgium. Education was, at the moment of the independence of Belgium, essentially in the hands of the Catholic Church. A first "school war" opposed catholics and secularists (liberals) between 1879 and 1914 and in the end, the catholic party won an absolute majority for thirty years. The balance of forces never enabled secularists in Belgium to inverse this situation but at least, they developed a state school system in every municipality as a competitor to the catholic school system⁹. The catholic school system became a « functional » public service: today, catholic schools which respect legal conditions are mostly subsidized by the State – not exactly in the same way as state schools – but dispose of their organizational and pedagogical autonomy (inside legal conditions, of course).

So, for the whole period that begins more or less in the midst of 19th century and that goes until the « golden sixties », the war between secularists and catholics, in France as well as in Belgium, is most of all a « school war ». To come back to Belgium, there was an ultimate attempt by secularists to dramatically change the situation: for the period 1954-1958 there was a liberal-socialist government who tried to foster state education¹⁰, but this government was defeated in the elections of 1958, where the christian-democrat party (successor of the catholic party) almost won an absolute majority in the whole country. After this, there was a great negotiation and a great compromise that fixed the prerogatives of the State and the Church in educational matters until now. This compromise was named *Pacte scolaire* and it put an official end to the « school war ». It is still the main line of organization of compulsory education in Belgium.

The end of the « school war » also had very important socio-political effects: as a political cleavage, the secularist/catholic cleavage was put to the backstage, where it remained for more or less forty years¹¹. The result was almost immediate: in the elections of 1961, the liberal party dramatically changed its main ideological line, ceasing to be a secularist party to reframe itself as a right-wing party on the socio-economic cleavage. It declared it was

⁸ But the evidence of gender oriented stereotypes among secularist elites is also well documented (Baubérot, 2011). It was not a specific Belgian situation of course : the scientist ideology of 19th century often showed despise against women and, generally, denied them a level of intelligence equal to men (Gould, 1981)

⁹ There were also efforts to develop some « non clerical » independent education institutions. The main success remains the Free University of Brussels (ULB/VUB) founded by the freemasons in 1834, and which is still today the second university in Belgium.

¹⁰ The expression "school war" (*guerre scolaire*) is commonly used by Belgian historians to speak of that period.

¹¹ To be clear, this means that there was no government formed on the basis of this cleavage until 1999 (see below). But it does not mean that there were no longer fractures within public opinion, as we will see in paragraph 2.

becoming open to catholics as well as to secularists and took as main ideological stance the defence of the « middle class » (small firms and self-employed).

As a result, within compulsory education, more than half of all the pupils are schooled within catholic schools. Moreover, these schools attract a growing majority of the children coming from middle-class or upper middle-class families. It means that catholic schools are strongly supported by families who dispose of the economic and cultural capital to invest most in the education of their children. Catholic schools are statistically the school of the « haves » and more and more secularist militants – who belong themselves to rather affluent strata of the society – choose catholic schools for their children.

This situation also led to a very different place of « secularism » in France and in Belgium. In France, the law of 1905 that organizes the separation between the Church and the State has officially split, we could say, the question of secularism from that of secularization. Although the word « *laïcité* » (secularism) is not present as such within the law, historians from both camps consider that secularism is inscribed as a principle of the organization of the French State¹². So, if there still exist « anti-religious » movements in France, there is no « secularist » movement as such: secularism is claimed by every fraction of the society as a « common good »¹³. The Belgian context is far from being so clear-cut. Constitutionally, Belgium functions with a system of « recognized cults or worldviews »¹⁴. As we have seen, the school remains a dormant conflict between secularists and catholics¹⁵. Sociologically, Belgian civil society has been predominantly organized along « pillars » (mainly the catholic one and the socialist/secularist one), which take people in charge from birth to death: education, health, participation to unions, to youth movements or non-profit organizations, and even funerals can be organized by catholic or secular institutions. Sure, the strength of those pillars has strongly weakened since the « silent revolution », but they are still alive, mainly within education.

So, there exists a « secularist movement », mainly in French speaking Belgium (*Centre d'Action Laïque*) that promotes both secularism as an institutional objective and fights again religion as a moral/ideological reference¹⁶.

This maintains a strong confusion between secularism as an institutional device and atheism as a personal philosophy. The statutes of the *Centre d'Action Laïque* explicitly define

¹² The principle of “*laïcité*” will in fact be inscribed in the French Constitution, but only after WWII.

¹³ With some exceptions as the « Union of secularist families », which overtly claims anti-religious positions.

¹⁴ Until now: Catholic, Protestant, Judaic, Anglican, Orthodox, Muslim, Buddhist, Humanist secularists.

¹⁵ To be true, it is partly the case in France too. In 1984, under the Presidency of François Mitterrand, the French government was obliged by a huge demonstration to abandon a law intending to put private school under the control of the government. A bit more than ten years later, there was a move in the opposite direction: the public school was defended by great demonstrations. But the problem of education is of a different nature in France, because private school scholarizes a much smaller part of the pupils.

¹⁶ In Flanders, the movement for free thought (*Vrijzinnigheid*) is much more independent from the defence of secularism.

« laïcité » as being both secularism such as we have defined it, and « the personal conception of a life without any God »¹⁷. So, being at the same time a believer *and* a secularist appears as a strange mix, at odds with traditional lines of ideological cleavages in Belgian society.

In this situation, after the end of the “school war”, the secularist/catholic cleavage was weakened and residual as a political cleavage. But it was to be renewed among public opinion for what could seem to be an « ultimate battle », which was the « culture wars » of 1970-2000.

2. The silent revolution: a true alliance?

The cooling of the religious cleavage in Belgium, in the end, did not boost the socio-economic cleavage because of the global transformation of the relations between capital and labour that we can trace back to the very beginning of the seventies.

The socio-economic cleavage itself was progressively weakened in all western countries by the process of « silent value revolution », which was described, among others, by Ronald Inglehart (Inglehart, 1977, 1997. Welzel and Inglehart, 2005)¹⁸. The main idea can be in a very sketchy way described as follows: at the end of the sixties, in all Western countries, a new generation began to reach political majority and enter in the « battlefield ». This generation was the first one not to have lived in war or inter-war periods. It had been socialized within a period of great improvement of material living conditions, and as a result, the basis of its political values were to be found more in such needs as affiliation, self-esteem, self-actualization and less in needs of material security or subsistence. The idea that a kind of « Silent Revolution » has taken place from the end of the sixties in most industrialized countries is now widely accepted, even if the detailed explanatory schemes of Inglehart remain controversial¹⁹.

Within the new « postmaterialist » or « postmodern » values²⁰, one subset takes a very important place: it is the value of « free disposal of self », which links gender questions (the right of women to decide whether or not to have children) and questions of sexual freedom (equal right to choose for both sexes, equal respect for all sexual orientations, rejection of puritanism). In Belgium, one issue at least was to produce in this new context a strong

¹⁷ Article 4 of the statutory rule of *Centre d'Action Laïque*.

¹⁸ Of course this « silent revolution » should be placed within the frame of the structural transformations of capitalism, but this is clearly outside the reach of this paper.

¹⁹ For instance, in *The Silent Revolution*, Inglehart considers the new regionalist movements as an instance of « postmaterialism », and he even cites Belgium as an example. But in the three decades that followed, in most European countries, it is the Radical Right that takes the lead in matter of regionalism, which is completely contradictory to Inglehart's intuition. No need to say this cleavage on regionalism has progressively become the dominant cleavage in Belgium.

²⁰ In his reelaboration of 1997, Inglehart considers « postmaterialism » as a subset of a global value cluster which he calls « postmodern values ».

alliance between secularism and feminism: the right to abortion²¹. Secularists, feminists, and freemasons converged from the end of the sixties in a new battlefield: women's bodies. In that case the convergence was straightforward: no institution is more reluctant to abortion than the Catholic Church. The situation is the more difficult that the weakening of the secularist/catholic cleavage had the paradoxical effect of putting catholic parties even more in the centre of the Belgian political system.

Indeed, the end of the « school war » has produced a new situation in which the new liberal party (see above), reframed as a right wing party, is now strongly opposed to the socialists. It means that the catholic party (now christian-democrat), although constantly declining within the constituency because of the diminishing number of « engaged » catholics, has become almost indispensable in every governmental coalition: it has switched to the centre on the socio-economic cleavage (which remains the key of government formation) and so it can be part either of a centre-left alliance (with socialists) or a centre-right alliance (with liberals), while the possibility of a liberal-socialist alliance has appeared for almost four decades as practically closed.

At the same time, the pressure towards changing the very repressive law on abortion was emerging from a growing part of Belgian society (including a number of progressive catholic movements). Indeed, it was not only a philosophical matter but also a social one: abortion, though strictly prohibited in Belgium, was largely practised. But women with sufficient resources were able to abort abroad in safe conditions, while women from « blue collar » condition were obliged to rely on clandestine practitioners with a number of strong physical injuries or even deaths. This situation was exerting a heavy pressure on the catholic party, which was still unavoidable to form a government but which knew very well that he had lost the majority within public opinion on that matter.

The vote of the law took a dramatic turn. The new law organizing the right to abortion was passed in 1990, under a government uniting socialists and christian-democrats. But christian-democrats (in the majority) voted against the law, while a great deal of liberal MP's and of ecologists (both in the opposition) voted in favour and so the law was adopted. A stronger dramatization took place when the King refused to approve the law. This was unprecedented in the history of Belgian monarchy: constitutionally, the King cannot express a personal opinion and therefore, he cannot refuse to approve a law. To avoid the problem, the government decided that the King was temporarily « not in capacity to reign », and in those circumstances (which normally apply only when the King is mad or ill or during war occupation), all the Ministers signed the law.

The law in favour of abortion can be considered as a true alliance between secularists and feminists, who on this question share the same values and together want to weaken the grip

²¹ This was the most striking conflict and the « core » of the dispute, but to be complete we should of course also speak about contraception, sexual freedom, divorce and the whole system of sexual morality.

of the Catholic Church on Belgian society, which is becoming everyday more secularized. This has given liberals and socialists the idea that, even if they are in strong disagreement about socio-economic matters, they should govern together to bury once and for all the secularist/catholic cleavage. The opportunity was given in 1999 around a dramatic ecological crisis. The Ecologist parties won more than 15 % of the vote at national level. Socialists and liberals decided to form a government together taking the ecologists on board, and this government (« rainbow government ») initiated what was probably one of the most « postmaterialist » legislations in the world, including making divorce a formality, accepting homosexual marriage and a very liberal law on euthanasia (Jacquemain, 2002).

This could have been the terminal phase of the secularist/catholic cleavage, the more so that the Catholic Church is now very annoyed by a lot of scandals about paedophile practices among the priests.

But meanwhile, the question of Islam had progressively emerged.

3. A new alliance against Islam?

The alliance between secularism and feminism around the questions of contraception and mainly abortion between 1970 and 2000 has given birth to a narrative where both go « naturally » hand in hand. It was probably true in that period, but, in a larger context, we have seen that things are more complex. Moreover, even after these three decades of common struggle, the sociological composition of the « hardcore » of secularist militants, as far as we can know, is still at odds with any kind of « postmaterialist stance ». For instance, the two main masonic organizations in Belgium, the *Grand Orient de Belgique* and the *Grande loge de Belgique* still refuse to accept women as members. A survey about the public of the *Centre d'Action laïque* in a Belgian province (Jacquemain, Jamin and Pieters, 2009) showed that among members and sympathizers, aged well-educated males are strongly over-represented. One lacks data, but interviews with members show that macho or homophobic attitudes are probably no less present than in the overall population.

So, even if secularism has been allied with feminism for that period, it still remains not quite clear if it was a structural or a circumstantial alliance.

The emergence of Islam, which has strongly penetrated public debate in France and in Belgium, has completely reframed the ideological context. It has polarized attitudes *within* the secularist and the feminist movements, giving birth to two opposite alliances.

In the first alliance, we can find feminists such as Elisabeth Badinter quoted above (and in part Susan Möller Okin), who consider that in western societies, violence and oppression against women is mainly confined to cultural minorities, i.e. immigrants. These feminists are allied to secularists who consider that the struggle for secularism is in the end a struggle for secularization: from this point of view, religion is considered as an archaism that requires tolerance, but that in an « ideal world » should naturally disappear. All things considered,

this is the position of the French philosopher Henri Peña Ruiz (2003) – member of the French Communist Party and adviser of Jean-Luc Mélenchon. For this alliance, the visible presence of Islam in European society is the sign of a regression both of women's rights and of rationality.

In the second alliance are involved feminists who consider that muslim women are victims twice: they are the victims of patriarchal rules (within global society and within their own community), but moreover, they are victims of racism, just as are the male members of their communities. In this group of feminists, we notably find Christine Delphy (2006; 2010) who does not hesitate to qualify Elisabeth Badinter as a « revisionist »: the way Badinter considers immigrant males as the fundamental (and almost unique) source of violence against women is a way of concealing the structural violence within the French (and Belgian) society. And alongside those feminists, we find secularists like Jean Baubérot (2005, 2011), or philosophers like Jocelyn Maclure and Charles Taylor (2011), and even islamologists like Olivier Roy (2005), who defends that secularism is a political principle of separation that cannot be confounded with an anti-religious device.

This is of course a rough distinction and there are nuances that should be made, but it seems that this distinction fits the public debate rather well and that most actors very well know in which « camp » they are²². To avoid to semantically dismiss one position from the beginning, I will call the first alliance the « republican » camp and the second the « liberal » one. Assuming that I am myself within the « liberal » camp, but that the « republicans » are strongly the majority among militant secularists, I will dedicate the remaining part of the paper to an argument (far from complete of course) against the republican stance²³.

a) The emergence of the veil problem in France.

At the end of the 1980s and the very beginning of the 1990s, some « headscarf affairs » emerged in the media and the public debate in France (Tevanian, 2005; Baubérot, 2005). A first « veil affair » developed in 1989 around two young Muslim girls that were expelled from their schools because they wanted to wear the Muslim headscarf (Laborde, 2008, 2010; Baubérot, 2005). The *Conseil d'Etat* broke the decision for it was creating discriminations without any legal bases.

Affairs of this kind got more and more numerous in the fifteen years that followed. The reasons for this are easy to understand and I will briefly enumerate them because they are the same as for Belgium. The first one is probably the consciousness by Muslim immigrants

²² The fracture within both secularist and feminist movements makes it difficult, nevertheless, to draw clear frontiers. Within the *Centre d'Action Laïque*, for instance, it is patent that the movement in Brussels, a multicultural city, is much more open and tolerant than in the old industrial suburbs of the Walloon cities. Among feminists, the Christian movements (« *Vie Féminine* », for instance) appear much more open than the socialist movements (« *Femmes prévoyantes socialistes* »). But even those organizations are divided.

²³ The expression « militant secularists » is important, because a great amount of Belgians are « de facto » - but in no way militant – secularists.

(among whom many had in fact turned to be French citizens, either by naturalization or by birth in France) that they had become permanent residents. So the choice to refrain from manifesting their religious convictions in order to make their « stay » easier had ceased to make sense: what can be considered as acceptable as a temporary « reserve » cannot be maintained for ever. So a number of sociologists (Tévanian, 2005; Baubérot, 2005, Martiniello, 2011) described this situation as a sign of *integration* from part of these muslim citizens.

But a great deal of feminists and secularists did not see it this way. For most of them, the muslim headscarf was seen as an unambiguous sign of submission of women. So the spreading of the veil was seen as the result of a new offensive strategy of « bottom up re-islamization », coming in no way from the free will of women, but from clerics inspired either by the Iranian revolution (1979) or the renewal of Salafism in Saudi Arabia. Probably there is a grain of truth in the idea of a pressure coming from outside. But the convincing explanation should take into account precisely this will of the new generations to be recognized as at the same time muslims and true French citizens. It should take into account all mechanisms of « identity reaffirmation », that is, not only collective identity (belonging to a community who reclaims its self-esteem), but also individual identity: the – too few – sociological studies tend to show that a number of young muslim women (not all of course) who decide to wear the *hijab* give to that decision the meaning of asserting their autonomy from their parents and from men in general (Chouder & al, 2008).

But the majority of French (and Belgian) society is not in a position to see all these nuances, and this for at least four reasons. The first one is the amplification of the crisis of labour integration coming from the very rapid weakening of the « fordist » model: the theme of « exclusion » from labour force as a new process of domination²⁴ has been strongly documented by sociologists (Castel, 1995; Rosanvallon, 1995). The proposal of the French philosopher Joel Roman (2006) is that in this situation, belonging to « national community » is immediately at stake, because it is no longer mediated by all the ties that were linked to labour organization. And there is a global tension around cultural symbols of this belonging. The veil is then characterized as a “rejection of assimilation” as citizens. The second reason to reject this « more visible » islam is the search of a scapegoat in times of socio-economic difficulties. So, among the « historically culturally French », exclusion easily leads to a raising xenophobia and veiled women are a visible, salient target. The third reason is that this xenophobia can be « reframed » as an acceptable moral position by the presence of an explicit political offer: Jens Rydgren (2003), among others, has shown that the effect of the presence of the Front National within the political offer from the beginning of the 1980s

²⁴ A « new » process, because exclusion has been replacing « exploitation ». A recurrent theme from sociologists is that while conflict between labour and capital around the sharing of the fruits of production is an « integrating » conflict, exclusion from the labour force offers no such possibility and is a « desintegrating » move, possibly leading to anomie.

helped to make xenophobia a « respectable » opinion²⁵. And fourthly, there has been a strong help from the international context: the attacks of 11th September 2001 and the aggressive military reactions that followed helped to build a new narrative of the « clash of civilizations » (Huntington, 1996) that made Muslims within Western countries perceived as some kind of a « fifth column » of the « Muslim world » in the context of the civilization wars.

In France, this « veil war » ended (officially, of course) in 2004, when, after the work of the « Stasi Commission », a law was passed that prohibited all religious signs for pupils in State schools, that is to say in the overwhelming majority of education institutions. It is true that this « Stasi commission », alongside this interdiction, proposed some measures of « mutual recognition » (for instance, changing the agenda of holidays to introduce some Jewish and Muslim holidays). But for the reasons briefly exposed above, French society was not in a condition to introduce all those nuances. Moreover, as was remarked by most analysts (Laborde, 2008; Baubérot, 2005 ; Roy, 2005), this law was formulated to essentially target muslim headscarf, even if this was not formulated explicitly (which would have been prohibited by the very principle of French « laïcité »).

b) The « cut and paste conflict » in French-speaking Belgium

How did the situation evolve in Belgium? The « veil problem » developed later. In fact, there are good reasons to think it emerged partly by contagion from the French situation. Indeed, the issues emerged in the public debate mainly after the case was « closed » in France, and probably under the influence of the new French law, a part of the secularist movement was seen as a « success » of secularization.

For reasons of differences in culture, language and organization of education, it is difficult to speak of the situation for « Belgium » as such and so, in what follows, I will limit myself to the situation within the *French-speaking community*²⁶.

²⁵ The recent French elections of 2012 (both presidential and legislative) have convincingly shown this “shaping effect” of the presence of a radical right populist party on public opinion in general.

²⁶ For an international public, it is probably useful to say a word of the constitutional organization of Belgium. It is a federal State, composed of three regions and three communities. The regions are territorial entities. The communities can be described – to say it simply – as « linguistic » entities. Regions and communities do not match perfectly: the Flemish Region is included within the Flemish community. The Walloon Region is mainly included within the French speaking community, but also includes a small German speaking community. The Region of Brussels has a special status and depends on both communities. There are no linguistic statistics, for they are prohibited in Belgium, but all indices show there are more or less 90 percent in Brussels who have French as their main language and 10 percent who have Dutch. One very important thing is that Brussels has become within the last 30 years a very multicultural city, with a population of « muslim culture » (true believer or not) estimated around 25 percent.

The communities are competent for all cultural matters, education and health, while the regions are competent for many economic and territorial matters. Justice, Foreign affairs, Military subjects and Social Security systems are in the hand of the Federal State.

A little time after the French law of 2004, a radical fringe of the secularist movement (outside the official *Centre d'Action Laïque*) began to militate for a law banning the veil for pupils in State schools. It was probably at the beginning a « cut and paste » movement from what had happened in France. This radical fringe had always looked at « *Laïque* » France as the « true » model of secularization, an ideal that was to be defended against the messy situation of « pillarized » Belgium, where the weight of the Catholic Church was thought to be unbearable (Geerts, 2009).

It may seem strange, at first sight, that this new « republican » agitation began just after the great victories of secularization at the very beginning of the 21st century (see section 2 above). But at second look, the move is quite evident: these victories had mobilized secularists and given the impetus to go further. At the very moment Belgium had become one of the most secularized countries in the world²⁷, a new « enemy » seemed to emerge, i.e. the transformation of « invisible » Belgian islam into a more assertive and demanding form of religion. It seems natural for the energy accumulated by the most radical fringe of the secularist movement to be deflected against what is perceived as an “emerging threat” , probably more « dangerous » than the Catholic Church itself, which has lost its grip on the great majority of the Belgian population. A part of the feminist movement is in the same state of mind: it is unbearable for this movement to see young women beginning to vindicate what those feminists see as an unambiguous sign of patriarchal domination²⁸.

The fact that the battlefield is education again also has important consequences. The reason is that education has become a very competitive sector in Belgium. Efforts to restrict free choice of the school by the parents have largely been defeated. As a consequence, there is little social mix and huge inequalities of results among schools – and therefore among pupils²⁹. The schools have many possibilities to « select » their public and this produces a strong segregation effect. The veil, then, becomes a « symbolic sign »: schools that tolerate it quickly attract many young muslim girls (and boys) who are among the less privileged part of the population. So they lose their pupils coming from middle class and upper middle class families. The phenomenon becomes important in Brussels, where a great proportion of pupils have grown within muslim culture (it does not mean, of course, that all those pupils are believers).

So, there are understandable reasons for the radical fringe of the secularist movement to enter into this battlefield and to claim the legal prohibition of the veil by law. Their main

²⁷ At least through its legislation. But the decline of Belgian catholicism is still going on and it makes Belgium resemble more and more the Lutheran countries of northern Europe.

²⁸ I could be defended that the secularist organizations in Belgium were suffering the « loss of their enemies » and that this “displacement” against islam has also been a way of maintaining a minimum of institutional vitality within the movement. But this hypothesis should be tested against empirical evidence.

²⁹ The Pisa surveys have constantly shown that the differences of results between pupils are very large in Belgian French speaking community. The best pupils fare rather well at the test, and the worse very badly.

argument is that without that prohibition, school managers are « left alone » and have to try to manage problems that are outside their reach.

But this campaign soon leads to ideological consequences that are not so different from what they are in France: it reframes xenophobia as a « respectable » position when it is targeted to Islam, conceived as a dangerous and archaic religion, which tries to impose its norms to the Belgian society. Young women wanting to wear the hijab are seen at best as « manipulated » by the males of their community, and at worse, as victims of a cruel oppression from their fathers, brothers or mothers. This ideological move extends to the secularist movement as a whole (with a few dissenters), and with the help of the media, the conditions for some kind of a « moral panic » are created.

Progressively, the conflict will go outside the school. Some « symbolic » events in all spheres of society will encourage a fantasized view of Islam. A few of them are very representative.

In 2006, a local welfare centre refuses to grant a welfare benefit to a veiled woman if she does not take it off. The argument is perfectly illegal: it says that, being received in a public local, the woman cannot show off her religion beliefs and is obliged to remain « neutral ». This example was sufficiently « eccentric » to be echoed by the media³⁰, but it was the first clear attempt to extend the obligation of « neutrality » from institutions to citizens.

In September 2009, a young Belgian woman of Turkish origin, Mahinur Ozdemir, is elected a member of the regional parliament of Brussels and presents herself there with a headscarf. The opposition parties protested strongly (although the Freedom of opinion of members of parliament is constitutionally even *more* protected than the freedom of opinion of ordinary citizens), and the polemics lasted for weeks.

On April 28th 2011, a law prohibiting wearing the Niqab in public (which is wrongly confused with « burqa » in the text) is voted by *all members* of the federal parliament but one (a Flemish ecologist). This was probably the first law to reach such unanimous approbation for a very long time: the country had been profoundly divided between Flemings and Walloons at the elections of 2009 and was left without any government for more than eighteen months³¹!

These events that may seem anecdotic are all examples of the global « reframing » of Islam as a barbaric misogynistic religion and of secularism as a « shield » against it. Outside the questions of women's patriarchal domination, Islam has remained within the media for all

³⁰ *La Libre Belgique*, 27/10/2006

³¹ It should be interesting here to investigate the sociological *effects* of the law. Very recently (June 2012) attacks were committed against policemen by islamic radicals coming from outside Belgium. The Niqab, which could be seen as a very marginal « problem » (if any) *before* the law, has now become a *serious* problem *because of* the law. It fuels both violent radical islamism on the one side, and on the other side, a radical « law and order » ideology within mainly (but not only) right wing parties. In a (somewhat outdated) sociological frame, we could see that the *latent function* of the ban law is to fuel conflictuality and to make radicalism more attractive within both « camps ».

kinds of reasons. Quite recently, a Member of Parliament published an opinion in a newspaper protesting against the alleged (but not confirmed) fact that some prison managers had banned pork from the meals of prisoners, in order to avoid preparing two different kinds of meat. Indeed, in some jails, the majority of prisoners are of muslim culture. In April 2012, a TV broadcast of the public television was titled «*Should we be afraid of islam* » and indeed presented misogynist (but not illegal) discourse by some imam that had been secretly filmed.

One could describe the development of this new « islamophobia » for pages and pages. The reasons why this is in line with public opinion in French-speaking Belgium are not very different from what they are in France. It is clear that this « alliance » between (a part of) the secularist movement and (a part of) the feminist movement, which I called the « republican » alliance, has strong counterproductive effects in the shaping of xenophobia as a respectable feeling and ideology. But nevertheless, is there not some defensible rationale for this alliance?

c) Turning to the normative point of view

If we come back to the position of Susan Möller Okin, which was cited at the beginning of this paper, there is clearly a core of truth: western societies (in this case, the « mainstream » French-speaking societies) are altogether more favourable to women than almost all other cultures, and then, we should be very careful in according group rights to minorities that could use them to worsen the situation of women inside their communities. I will not try to contest this argument (that I believe to be true, but within some limits), but I would like to conclude by trying to explain why it does not seem relevant in the context of the Belgian “anti-Islam war”.

The first reason is that, as far as I know, in the Belgian situation, muslims do not claim rights that could deteriorate the situation of the members of their community, nor even rights that could be *enforced* against members of their community (excepted the normal parental rights that are recognized to all Belgian citizens). There is no demand for being judged by « communitarian » laws or courts, except maybe within some small fringes of radical islamists that receive no support from muslims in general, and still less from « liberal » secularists. What seems to happen, on the contrary, is a move from a part of mainstream society to *restrict cultural individual rights* in an ever growing field of social life: right to wear the clothes one judges appropriate, right to eat the way one wants to eat, right to express one’s faith in public. All things considered, this move seems to be the real *slippery slope* in the Belgian situation: the republican secularists are asking more and more prohibitions, because the main point does not seem to prevent damages against women, but making muslims go back to their « previous invisibility ». It may be true that the situation of women within immigrant muslim communities, all things considered, is worse than within « mainstream » society, but this does not require inventing new laws, new offences or new crimes: we already have plenty of criminal laws. What we need, probably, is more efficient

social work and mainly fewer discriminations, in short, an alliance based on efforts to promote social justice (in difficult conditions), and not on a criminalization of behaviours that are not offensive *as such*.

True, freedom is not the whole thing to make a society hold together. Republican secularism often quotes the famous sentence by Lacordaire « *Entre le faible et le fort, entre le riche et le pauvre, entre le maître et le serviteur, c'est la liberté qui opprime et la loi qui libère* ». This rejoins another argument by Okin: feminists are very sensitive to the oppression *within* private structures such as family. This is a point one cannot reject easily if one wants to take equality seriously. The question here is that to some extent a kind of « state paternalism » is justified in order to protect the weakest. It is the reason why even liberal secularists carefully consider the possibility to ban the hijab in schools for some categories of age, for instance. But it must be admitted that the prohibitionist stance hardly protects women: in any case, the sanction is imposed to them and not to those who are supposed to be their oppressors. In the famous case of the « anti-burqa » law, sanctions are imposed to the women who wear the niqab in public: they may be fined, or even, in the worst case, they may be sent to jail. It is hard to see how it will improve their situation. A number of police officers have already said that this law seemed inapplicable, anyway. From a consequentiality point of view, this law seems thus very difficult to justify. Moreover, a very recent study by Eva Brems, of the Ghent University³² has shown that many women in niqab wear it voluntarily and that it confers them a strong « feeling of liberty and self-esteem ». Even if we take into account the possibility of adaptative preference, it seems clear that the most probable effect of this prohibition will be to keep these women home and not to lead them to take off their niqabs. I am not quite sure that State paternalism is always better than religious paternalism. We should be careful about that and a charge of adaptive preferences must not too easily be deduced from a behaviour that goes outside our mainstream social norms. As Cecile Laborde (2008) puts it quite clearly and extensively, the role of the State is to give everybody the means to live an autonomous life (with a special attention to the weakest). It is not to *force* people to live autonomously³³.

But if we now turn off from the niqab, which is quantitatively a minor problem, to the veil (hijab), republican secularists, along their own line of reasoning, should be very prone to protect muslim women against what is becoming the plague of our societies: unemployment and exclusion. On the contrary, the suspicion that has extended to everything that looks like muslim is a heavy burden for women³⁴, because, on a strong secularist line, they should be obliged to take off their veils if they want to be employed within the public service. It is hard to see how this could help women to reinforce their autonomy. But there is here something even worse: as public service is less and less distinguishable from private sector (many tasks

³² Quoted in *Courrier International*, 2012-05-17.

³³ This would be a double bind anyway.

³⁴ Many observers have noted that only *women* are under such scrutiny. The male symbolic or religious signs, like the muslim beard, seem to pose no problem.

that seem to pertain to public service are now delegated to private firms), some private firms now try to ban the veil on the argument that it “disturbs their clients”. Until now, courts have discarded that argument as discriminatory. But many lawyers insist on the fact that jurisprudence is changing and that justice could cease to be, in a near future, on the side of working women. So, in what is probably the most crucial point – offering muslim women real opportunities to get jobs and financial autonomy –, the republican secularist strategy seems dangerously counterproductive.

My second argument can be summarized that way: trying to make muslim women more autonomous by *prohibiting* them to dress according to what they express as their desires can be efficient only at three conditions : 1) if their wearing the veil is mainly (or purely) a decision of submission from their part; 2) if they feel ready to use the prohibition as an opportunity to revolt against that submission and 3) if confronted with that opportunity, they are able to impose their oppressors their choice to take off the dress in order to be able to stay in the streets or to keep their jobs. It is hard to see, for all empirical knowledge we have until now, how the conjunction of those three conditions could be satisfied in more than a few cases. So we can say that, on the whole, and surely with qualifications and exceptions, the “state paternalist” strategy to make muslim women more autonomous will be self-defeating.

There is a third reason to be sceptical about the prohibitionist move: if we want to help people to be autonomous, even accepting that there could be a rationale for a dose of paternalism, it never seems justified to disqualify the « victims » themselves as interlocutors. It is a form of disrespect that invalidates any set of « good intentions ». Helping people (in this case, women) to get out of possible tricky situations of (more or less) accepted submission always begins with a recognition of those people as having their word to say in the process. The most reluctant characteristic of the (most extreme) republican secularism is indeed the fact that the words of women wearing the niqab (or even the hijab) are never taken seriously. They are not invited to participate to debates about their situation. They are not invited to intervene in the legislative process. There is no serious attempt to give empirical support to the fact that those women are dominated, or manipulated, and to what extent. In fact, most (not all) republican secularists impose to those women an “infantilization” (treat them as children) they would never accept for themselves, in any circumstance.

Moreover, and this is the fourth reason for scepticism, there is in fact among republican secularists a double narrative about veiled women, which is radically contradictory. They are considered as dominated, submitted women who cannot get free by themselves, nor express an autonomous judgement. But at the same time, they are strongly accused of wearing the veil only for the pleasure of transgression or for strategic reasons (to increase the visibility of Islam). It is difficult to see how both accusations can hold at the same time. Ismahane Chouder, Malika Latreche and Pierre Tevanian (2008) talked with some forty

veiled young women and described something which is neither submission nor strategy, but indeed, a kind of « assertive transgression » : many of the young women they talked with described some absolute desire of being « truly themselves » (which is in fact very in line with the mainstream individualist culture). And they often decided to wear the veil *against* their family's will. Surely, this is not the whole story. But it is a possible indication of what is really at stake: it is very difficult for feminists or for secularists to recognize that there can be a way toward emancipation or self-assertion that could be very different from the one those "white secularist feminists" *have chosen for themselves*.

I would like to add a fifth argument, which is specific to French-speaking Belgium. Being a former catholic society, Belgium has retained a lot of catholic traditions that are still widespread, even in our secular society. For instance, it is not so uncommon to see a nun walking in her traditional dress. This dress is surely « stricter » than the hijab and barely less strict than the niqab. But it never raises any problem. If we take the republican secularists argument seriously, it is hard to see why it is so totally different (and so much worse) to decide to wear a niqab than to decide to wear a nun's dress, which implies an explicit engagement to obedience and an explicit renunciation of sexuality. To be true, there are no longer many nuns in my country, but in any case still more than muslim women in niqab. How is it that nobody ever proposed a law to fine them or to send them to jail? At another level, it seems unbearable that a muslim father imposes the veil to his young daughter (and I can partially agree). But it seems perfectly normal that a christian father imposes a catholic sacrament (communion) to his six-year-old child. The conclusion seems to be that the problem is not religion as such, but *alien* religion. At any rate, the way public debate is framed cannot but lead muslim people to see things that way.

This last argument is of uttermost importance in Belgium. Until now, there has been no decision to ban or not the hijab in state schools. There is a strong lobbying from republican secularists. But there are also proposals of compromise coming from other associations: to ban the hijab for pupils until sixteen, but to impose freedom for pupils over sixteen³⁵. But one thing is sure: nobody is now able to impose « neutrality » to the catholic schools. So, if the ban for state schools is finally voted, Belgians muslims will be confronted to some strange situation: their religious signs will be prohibited in half the schools in the name of secularism and they will be prohibited in the other half in the name of catholicism³⁶. It is difficult to see how it would not be considered as a global (hypocritical) discrimination.

None of the preceding argument is undisputable of course. But together, it seems that they build a strong case against the « republican alliance ».

³⁵ This proposal comes from a process of intercultural dialogue initiated by the former Minister of Integration, but which has received no follow-up so far.

³⁶ As a matter of fact, the hijab is already banned in the overwhelming majority of state schools and of catholic schools through local rules. There are exceptions in both types of schools.

4. Conclusion

I have reviewed three moments of alliance between secularism and feminism in Belgium, in order to answer my initial question. Is secularism so good for women? At first sight, if we follow Okin's argument, the answer should be a straightforward « yes ». But of the three periods considered, this answer is clear for only the second one. In the first period and in the third period, things are much more mitigated, to say the least. The sake of women is a true concern for the secularist movement. But at the same time, it also appears as a *battlefield* in its everlasting struggle against religion. If we broaden the perspective, we could say that at the world's scale, religious systems are no doubt much worse for women. But is it so sure? Was the condition of women so good in Stalin's URSS, in Maoist China, in Red Khmers' Cambodia?

In the words of Baubérot, we could say that the attitude of today's republican secularists toward Muslim women is not so different from the distrust against women in the offensive secularism of the 19th century: in both cases, women are accused to be manipulated by clerics and to be unable to put an end to that manipulation by themselves. So they need the intervention of well-intended (paternalist white) males and should be glad to receive it.

I am not at all qualified to tell if there can exist a religion without patriarchalism. But it seems highly plausible that there exists patriarchalism without religion.

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